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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, SCA/PPD AND DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TAMIL NEWSPAPER EDITOR'S "WHITE VAN" ARREST

Ref: A) Colombo 146, B) Colombo 81, C) Colombo 32, D) 08 Colombo 507

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Eyewitnesses reported that several men, some in plain clothes and some in police uniforms took Tamil newspaper editor M. Vidyatharan at gunpoint at about 9:45 am local time on February 26 and bundled him into a white van. Vidyatharan was taken as he came out of a funeral parlor in the Colombo suburb of Mount Lavinia. Upon learning of the apparent abduction, Charge phoned the head of the Presidential Secretariat (NSC-equivalent) Lalith Weeratunga to express concern about Vidyatharan's safety. A few hours later, the Director General of the Media Centre for National Security said that Vidyatharan had not been abducted but arrested in connection with the recent LTTE air attack on Colombo. Vidyatharan is now undergoing questioning by police. Vidyatharan is the editor of Sudar Oli, a Tamil-language weekly newspaper which often reports on controversial issues. Earlier this week he wrote an article on the situation in the Sri Lanka's north which gave details of IDPs injured in aerial bombings and included disturbing pictures of children injured and killed in the bombing. End Summary.

12. (U) Mr. M. Vidyatharan, editor of Tamil-language weekly newspaper Sudar Oli, was the apparent victim of an abduction this morning at 9.45 a.m. Local reports said that Vidyatharan was taken at gunpoint by several men from a funeral parlor in the southern Colombo suburb of Mount Lavinia, who forced him into a white van. Some of the men who took the editor were in plain clothes, some in police uniforms. A Mount Lavinia Police Inspector told RSO FSN that Vidyatharan was taken as he stepped out of the parlor to take a telephone call on his mobile. The Inspector said that police officers may have arrested Vidyatharan but added his jurisdiction had not been informed in advance of the operation by outside officers. Post received contradictory reports of how many uniformed and plain clothes men were involved in the abduction; however, all reports agree on the license plate number of the van. The van left the funeral parlor with Vidyatharan heading towards the Air Force base at Ratmalana and may have been escorted by police, as a police van was reported to be nearby.

Charge and Other Diplomatic Missions  
Urge GSL to Ensure Vidyatharan's Safety  
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13. (SBU) Sudar Oli publisher V. Saravanapavan called Pol Chief at about 10:05 to report the incident and request Embassy's intervention. Charge immediately phoned the head of the Presidential Secretariat (NSC-equivalent) Lalith Weeratunga. Weeratunga told Charge that he was already aware of the case. He said he had brought the matter to the attention of the President, who had called Inspector General of Police Wickramaratna and

instructed him to take every measure to ensure the newspaper editor's safety. Other diplomatic missions and media advocacy groups also contacted the GSL officials, including the Norwegian and Canadian missions who phoned Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona.

#### Abducted or Arrested?

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¶4. (SBU) A few hours after the apparent abduction, the Media Minister Anura Yapa announced that Vidyatharan had not been abducted but arrested and was being questioned. The Director General of the Media Centre for National Security said that Vidyatharan had been arrested in connection with the recent LTTE air attack on Colombo. Sudar Oli publisher V. Saravanapavan, who was present during the incident, insisted that it was not a normal arrest, but rather a forced abduction. Foreign Secretary Kohona told the Norwegian DCM and Canadian High Commissioner told that Vidyatharan had been arrested because of telephone calls made on the night of the attacks on Colombo, including a purported call Vidyatharan received from "Sea Tiger" Chief Soosai that night. Inspector General of Police Jayantha Wickramaratna, however, related a significantly different version, telling Charge that Vidyatharan had indeed been abducted by unknown people and taken by force. He said a police team found Vidyatharan "lying in an isolated place" in a slum area of Colombo. According to the IGP, Vidyatharan is merely being questioned and has not been arrested.

#### Vanni Coverage Likely Cause of Arrest/Abduction

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¶5. (U) Sudar Oli's recent coverage of the humanitarian crisis in northern Sri Lanka highlighted growing civilian casualties in the Vanni. In the February 22-28 edition, Vidyatharan wrote a full page article on the situation in the Vanni entitled "IDPs pain - Thoppigala and Mullaitivu." The article was about the destruction caused by aerial bombing in the Vanni and included disturbing photographs of children injured and killed in the bombing. Among the photos was one showing three dead children lying in a row, one of a child who lost their ears in the bombing and one who had lost their eyes. Two weeks ago, the Criminal Investigative Division (CID) took Vidyatharan in for questioning after Sudar Oli published a statement by Tamil National Alliance MP Selvan Adaikalanathan that alleged thousands of civilian casualties. In a January 15 interview on Sri Lankan television, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa referred to Sudar Oli as an "LTTE publication."

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: As in the Keith Noyahr case (ref D), the early intervention of civil society and diplomatic missions likely prevented Vidyatharan's "white van" incident from turning into an abduction. The government's multiple and conflicting explanations of the incident open uncomfortable questions about its role in similar incidents that have not later developed into legal arrests. Post will continue to monitor developments in the case and press the government to conduct its investigation according to Sri Lankan law. The incident can only add to the growing pressure on journalists to avoid any reporting on the fighting in the north that strays from the GSL's public position of "zero civilian casualties."

MOORE